



Athens mosque: A foundation stone

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Kneeling on the al-Salam mosque's green carpet, 30 Arab men perform the Muslim sundown prayer as another day in the holy month of Ramadan fades over the white apartment blocks of Athens.

Devotion is followed by food - an iftar meal of chicken, rice and oven-baked potatoes in the mosque's communal kitchen.

The al-Salam mosque - a ground floor room and basement - is among the largest of 20 informal Muslim prayer rooms dotted around the city's working class districts.

Slated for obsolescence by the imminent building of a central, Saudi-funded mosque said to be in the final stages of planning, the low-profile prayer-rooms in which Arab, Balkan and Asian Muslims pray are under a media spotlight.

In a country that is 98 per cent Greek Orthodox Christian and experienced four centuries of Ottoman rule, coverage is seldom positive.

"I see headlines in the newspapers referring to secret mosques," says prayer-leader Mahmoud Mounir, a Sudanese doctor and Arab community leader who has lived in Greece for 30 years.

"Not the case. We're proud Muslims, not hiding from anyone but forced to practise our religion in an underground way. This doesn't mean we're doing something secret or dangerous. You can't compare this space," he says, gesturing around the room, "with secret theological schools where terrorists meet."

More than 100,000 Muslims - 2 per cent of Greece's population - live in Athens, the only EU member-state capital without an official mosque. Some 30 years after the idea was first floated, the Greek foreign ministry has allocated a 30,000 sq metre plot of land in the distant Paeania suburb, 20km north-east of Athens, for this purpose. "The Greek government gave its approval, the Arab side is ready for construction [to start], the Saudi government is financing the project and the Church has even given its blessing," says Abdallah Abdallah, Palestinian Authority ambassador and the project's chief negotiator with the Greek foreign ministry.

The choice of location was decided after Archbishop Christodoulos, head of the Greek Orthodox church, demanded the mosque be placed well outside central Athens, foreign ministry officials say. "If we don't take the game in hand and create a space in which a massive section of the population can pray or bury its own, they will rent 100 storerooms in awful places around Athens, in five or six of which you'll find Al-

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Qaeda supporters developing secretly," says one foreign ministry official.

But with Greece set for a general election next year, the mosque project appears to have stalled.

A large cross stands on the site in Paeania - evidence of popular, Orthodox Church-led opposition to the project.

In the capital's oldest Arab coffee house, The Nile, regulars drift in after iftar to smoke shisha, play cards and watch the Al-Jazeera station on satellite television. A well-stocked bar boasts everything from vodka and martini to whisky and ouzo. Customers - exclusively male - voice opposition to the Paeania mosque. "If they put the mosque in the [city] centre, we would willingly pay for it out of our own pockets," says a night-time security guard.

"But they want to build it for purely prestige reasons and because the International Olympic Committee is leaning on them."

That pressure is to build a mosque for the capital in time for next year's Athens Olympics.

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